

Acton Finance Committee 9/28/04 Minutes

Members Present: Jonathan Chinitz, Pat Clifford, Pat Easterly, Bob Evans, Herman Kabakoff, Rheta Roeber, John Ryder, David Stone

Gim Hom was absent owing to the arrival of a granddaughter.

School Choice – Bill Ryan, Superintendent, APS – Mr. Ryan distributed a packet of general information for the Committee. He highlighted a recent Boston Magazine article ranking school systems, which the magazine does each year. He noted that Acton ranked very high in academic performance, e.g., 4th highest in SAT scores. This year, the criteria included per pupil spending, an area in which Acton is below other towns with which it is compared. This lowered our overall rating.

We began the year with about 2,700 students in the region, and 2,600 in the local schools.

Mr. Ryan praised the Governor, the Treasurer and State Legislature for passing the new School Building Assistance bill. Acton will receive grants of \$21M for the Jr. High and \$57M for the High School. Following FinCom's lead, the schools will apply for Pothole funds again this year. We appear to qualify based on increases in foundation enrollment and decreases in local aid over the last few years.

Mr. Ryan noted that Acton was #2 and Acton Boxborough was #4 in the Globe's ranking of schools by MCAS results.

The School Choice program began about 1991. We were one of the first districts to decide to participate. The funding is \$5,000 per student from the Chapter 70 funds of the sending district. Prior to school choice, we had a history of accepting out of district students for whom we set our own tuition rates. With the new legislation, we were allowed to keep those students, but not accept any new ones under the old program. Mr. Ryan said that Acton has had a culture of school choice for 40 years at the elementary level. He's convinced that it leads to competition that improves the schools.

The main anchor for school choice demand is at the high school level. Some kids are interested in choice at the Junior High, but this is mainly to get into the High School. We made the decision to get into school choice at a point of declining enrollment. Accepting choice students was seen as a way to maintain staff. There was some concern about getting students with difficulties, but this has not been the case. At one point we had over 350 students, bringing in \$1.5M dollars per year. Mostly they came for the academics in Acton. Some came from smaller districts, such as Harvard, which have good schools, but a narrower range of programs owing to their size. The fact was that kids wanted to come here, were dropped off at 6:30 in the morning and stayed until 6:00 at night, which sent a powerful message to our own kids. As our own enrollments grew, we ran out of space for school choice.

Mr. Chinitz asked whether Mr. Ryan thinks the School Committee has made the right decision in deciding not to accept school choice students in recent years. Mr. Ryan responded that the Town

needs to have a serious discussion on this. He points out that while the \$5,000 funding is less than the \$8,500 total cost per student, it is likely more than the marginal cost of adding students. The schools do have space. There are of course other constraints, like having enough counselors, parking spaces, etc. However, he thinks it needs to be examined. We built the Junior High for ten [teaching] teams and we have eight. Each team is 100 to 125 kids. The High School was built for 2,050 kids and has about 1,750 now, although it is expected to grow to 1,850.

Ms. Roeber asked how the admission system works. Mr. Ryan explained that it is purely by lottery. The only preference is for siblings of students who are already in the system. We do not provide transportation.

Mr. Evans suggested that the schools go ahead with the planning needed to accept choice students beginning in the fall. This would help with the override discussion as it would show we are seeking other sources of revenue.

Committee Reports:

BOS – Kabakoff – One item of note was the proposed issuance of bonds for the Douglas School renovation. There was some discussion at the BOS as to whether members of the Finance Committee can purchase any of the bonds, owing to a role the Committee may have had in the issuance process. Members of the BOS are clearly not eligible. John Murray said that he would seek to clarify this issue. Flyers advertising the bond issue were distributed at school and elsewhere in town, so people who are restricted from purchasing the bonds, and members of their families, should be aware of this issue.

CPA – Ryder – The CPC met and approved the CPA plan. They are soliciting projects for a total of roughly \$1M in funding. They have also submitted an article for the upcoming special town meeting to reallocate some funds from last year's grants.

Public Safety Building – Chinitz – See the minutes forwarded with the materials for this meeting.

School Building Projects – Evans – The Junior High School project has only recently been completed, owing to a long-running dispute with the contractor, which has finally been resolved in the last couple of weeks. There are some things left to be taken care of, such as HVAC balancing, like that which is being done at the High School.

School Committees – Easterly – APS met this week. The Gates PTO is concerned about the percentage of teaching assistants that they are funding in light of cutbacks elsewhere. There was also an update on the damage to the Gates school, estimated to be \$135,000-140,000, of which only about \$14,000 will be funded by the Town. The plan is to have an "A" budget for FY06 drafted by the end of this week, which would include adding back previous cutbacks and some additions for growth.

Old Business

Acton 2020 Capital Planning – Committee members felt that the meeting was useful, but somewhat limited in scope. The main topic was attempting to project how much funding the taxpayers might be willing to provide and how it should be allocated. Ms. Clifford noted that FinCom’s definition of capital spending remains elusive for the larger committee and that we need to continue to work on this.

Nagog Woods 40B Project Research – Mr. Chinitz is still gathering information on school enrollment from Acton’s existing apartments.

New Business

Special Town Meeting Articles

Mr. Ryder summarized the background of the reallocation of CPA funding between projects by the Acton Community Housing Corporation. Mr. Evans explained that he is opposed to the proposal because the funding is apparently being spent on projects other than those described in the Town Meeting warrant (purchase of sewer betterments versus striking at targets of opportunity for affordable housing). There was some discussion of whether the CPA money that was not spent should be reallocated within ACHC, or returned to the CPA general fund for appropriation at the Spring 2005 Town Meeting.

Mr. Chinitz recommended that FinCom defer voting on this article until our next meeting, when we can invite ACHC and CPC representatives to answer questions.

Ms. Roeber recommended that we also defer voting on the zoning articles in order to get more information.

Issues for the Committee

What role should FinCom play in Ballot Question Committees? Mr. Stone explained that he believes FinCom should provide analytical support for the voters on both sides of any financial issue. It was agreed that any information developed by FinCom should be made publicly available via the Town website. The committee members felt that FinCom members should be able to work with ballot question committees, but only as individuals. The FinCom will of course take an official position for Town Meeting.